

“The Wheat and the Weeds”

Introduction: Why doesn't God do something?! Such is the cry of many as they look around at a world that seems to be filled with one catastrophe after another, a world in which there is much innocent suffering. Just a couple of years ago, research revealed that the most common stated reason for unbelief among the younger generations, Millennials and Gen Z-ers (people 10-40 years old), was that they had a hard time believing that a good God would allow so much evil or suffering in the world.

As we examined this issue in our September Adult Sunday school class, we noted that there are four statements that people struggle to hold together:

1. There is a God.
2. God is loving and good.
3. God is all powerful.
4. There is innocent suffering in the world.

As more than one observer has put it, trying to hold these four truths together is like “an impossible chess match.” Which piece do you move? If there is innocent suffering, and God hasn't done anything about it, then the conclusion becomes that either God is not all powerful, or he's not as loving and good as we thought, or maybe he doesn't exist at all!

Since we are exploring ways in which we need God to restore us as we dig out of the years of covid, pondering this issue will hopefully be helpful, either for our own walk of faith, or as we seek to help others in their walk. Over the course of the next two weeks, we'll ask three parables of Jesus to help shine the light of the gospel as we walk down the often foggy corridors of questions we have regarding the suffering of the innocent and the goodness of God. [READ]

I. Trouble in the Fields of God

In his book on evil, suffering, and faith, author Thomas Long observes that these texts raise at least three questions regarding suffering, and evil: God, did you cause this? Can we fix it? Will it always be this way? We'll look at the first two questions today.

A. In the parable known as the Wheat and the Weeds, Jesus pictures a wheat field in which the owner has sown good seed. But one morning, when they wake up, the servants of this owner discover that there is trouble in the field: Weeds had begun to grow among the wheat. The servants were puzzled and asked the farmer, “Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?”

B. If we read between the lines, the real question lurking in the background of their stated question might be this: “God, did you cause this?” Another hurricane wreaks havoc, leaving many victims and much destruction in its wake. Graves of thousands of Ukrainian citizens, not only dead but tortured, are uncovered. A pandemic, deadly and disruptive, just won't go away. Is God somehow in the middle of all this? God, where are you? This question doesn't reveal a lack of faith. It's an honest question, a visceral response, a real part of an ongoing dialogue that makes up a life of faith. It's a

question that is trying to make sense of who God is and what is going on in our life, and in the world around us.

C. Maybe, as we try to reason it out, God sends suffering to shape our character. Or he creates an evil alternative in order to make choosing a good one meaningful. Or maybe God is just flat out punishing us for our sin (the conclusion reached by Job's friends). But the landowner is clear: "An enemy did this." God does not plant evil in the fields of our lives and in his good creation. As John declares: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 Jn. 1:5).

II. The Presence of the Enemy

A. Of course, this raises more questions. Who is this enemy, and where did this enemy come from? Here, our way remains murky. The prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, as they speak on one level of evil kings, seem like they are leading us to consider on another level that this enemy is a fallen angel who sought to make himself God and was cast from heaven to earth (Isa. 14, Ezek. 28). Here, as Peter warns, he continues to prowl around, looking for someone to devour (1 Pe. 5:8). Peter, and later Jesus, as he explains this parable to his disciples, calls this prowler the devil. Here's how Jesus puts it (vv. 37-39):

The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels.

Importantly, identifying the enemy in this way is not to revert to pre-scientific, fairytale images, but to name a deep theological truth that evil has a personal, trans-human, spiritual reality. Evil is not just a failing, it is a force that seeks to oppose and destroy all that God desires for us and for his creation. And so "our struggle," as Paul names it, "is not against enemies of blood and flesh . . . but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

B. So, while we cannot explain how evil got into the world, we are given some truths to affirm about it. Evil does not come from the hand of God. Evil is an intruder into the goodness of creation. Evil is God's enemy, not God's instrument. While it's easy to point our fingers, we've all become entangled and complicit in it. Evil is a powerful spiritual force that we must be on the lookout for and oppose.

C. And this, as the parable goes on, is just what the servants want to do. Referring to the weeds, sown by the enemy, they ask the landowner "Do you want us to go and pull them up?" To which the landowner responds: "No, because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them." There were two problems with what the servants wanted to do.

1. First, when young, the wheat and the weeds looked pretty much alike; it was hard to distinguish between the two until they matured. Further, as they grew, the roots of the weeds would intertwine with those of the wheat, and the farmer didn't want the wheat uprooted before its time. So, he counseled patience: "Let both grow together until the harvest." What the servants lacked was both the wisdom to know what to pull, but also the ability to pull correctly without doing damage. How easy it is for us to pronounce judgment on someone or something, and to end up judging wrongly.

It doesn't mean we shouldn't take a stand against evil wherever possible. Earlier in Matthew we read that Jesus blesses peacemakers and those persecuted for pursuing righteousness, as well as calling us to

be salt and light in the world (5-7). Pursue justice, seek righteousness, and love your enemy, but leave the ultimate judgment to me, the landowner instructed.

2. A second problem with the servant's proposal is that forcefully yanking up the weeds is not God's way of exercising power. Do you remember the response when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane? Matthew describes it in chapter 26. Judas, the betrayer, arrives with a large crowd armed with swords and clubs. After identifying Jesus with a kiss,

the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "Put your sword in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" [Ma. 26:47-56]

Lack of power is not the issue (as Rabbi Kushner concluded). Use of power is. The sword, the use of force, is not the way of the God we meet in Jesus. His power is expressed, paradoxically, in weakness, on the cross, with the weapon of love. Healing comes through his wounds. It is so unlike our human exercise of power that we don't know how to see it. Deeds of love and mercy get cast aside. Instead, we look for politicians to support our causes, or guns and bombs to beat back our enemies, or fine sounding arguments to force others to agree with us. We lose faith in God because we have forgotten, or don't really understand, the power of love. God will come like a divine warrior, but he makes war in his own unique, loving way.

D. So where do we stand with our "impossible chess match?" If we can understand the pieces a little more fully, here's how the board looks:

1. Is there a God? Yes, but this God never guarantees bad things will never happen. The world is a tragic place. Further, this God does not sit behind a curtain pushing buttons, or not, to make bad things happen, or not. Instead, the God of Jesus Christ enters into our world and into our suffering and walks with us in it. This is incarnation.

2. Is God is loving and good? Yes, we see this in living color, on the cross, where he loves us by giving up his life for us, taking sin and evil upon himself in a dramatic, mind-bending way. This is crucifixion.

3. Is God all powerful? We see this in another mind-bending way in the empty tomb, in his victory over death, which demonstrates his power and validates the cross. This is resurrection.

4. Is there is innocent suffering? Yes, but in the age to come everything about evil will be thrown into the fire and burned to nothing. Evil will be no more and will celebrate no victories. Even our memories will be healed along with our suffering. This is new creation.

Hopefully this begins to be helpful to us as we seek restoration of our own faith, hope, and love, and as we come alongside those who are wondering about the goodness and love and even existence of the God we worship and serve.

Next week, we'll pick up with new creation, the ultimate harvest, and the parables of the mustard seed and yeast, and see what they add to the mix. For now, let us go to the cross to be reminded, and to celebrate, the amazing love and power of the God who makes himself known in Jesus.